

It's been happening once or twice a year for about 13 years now. The Bob Dylan road show comes around, and almost always seems to hit the East Coast in autumn. Carnival time when there's a slight chill in the air, and the mad masked dance of Halloween seems to float into the harvest celebration. A Dylan show is somewhat like a carnival. A carnival of the mind wandering all kinds of crooked paths, but a carnival nonetheless. And like the best carnivals that seem to vanish in the night and set up before dawn, there's something about this carnival that makes you want to follow.

This tour was a bit different than other tours that will stop at tiny theaters in out of the way places, state fairs and casino ballrooms. This tour was for the most part big hockey arenas in major cities and the first such tour with Dylan without a major opening act or playing with an already established band in 20 years. Originally this was to be coupled with the release of Dylan's new album "Love And Theft," an album that had a massive publicity campaign behind it including for the first time a TV commercial. But that publicity campaign and in a sense the album went up in the flames of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

And September 11<sup>th</sup> hovered around this tour like a ghost. And even on the album there were eerie coincidences with lines like "Sky full of fire, pain pourin' down." And Bob Dylan whether he admits it or not is someone who's always sung the news in one way or another. He did it the first time I saw him, when I was 12 and barely knew who he was, a week after the Kennedy assassination on some chilly November night in Newark, New Jersey and he's doing it now.

The thing about Bob Dylan in concert is it's never the same show. He can sing exactly the same songs in the same order (a rare occurrence) and it will not be like the night before. He is incapable of singing a song the same way twice. What can be snarled and angry one night could be gentle and compassionate the next. Feel and inspiration are the guiding lights, along with the fact that this is a master magician who almost always has something up his sleeve. And that something can be a song never played live before, a new arrangement, a new line or word, a harp solo where there wasn't one - anything. You never know what it's gonna be, where it's gonna come and that's the fun of it.

And on this tour the speculation was rampant. "*Love And Theft*" was recorded with his road band, so you knew they knew the songs. But which ones would they do? And what others?

And on the first night, the surprise came on the first song, an old country song sung by Hank Williams, "Wait For The Light To Shine," and in these darkest of times, there was no doubt what he was singing about. That night he did four songs from the new album, but each night it would change,

some would be dropped, some added. And sometimes the opening song would change to another old country song that he debuted this year in Europe, "Hummingbird," a song about a train.

And every night Dylan fans worldwide would go on the Net in search of the set list and what it would reveal and wait for the reports to come in. And come in they did and they were overwhelmingly positive not only from the fans but from the press. And for a month I watched, read and waited and finally on November 11<sup>th</sup>, Dylan came to Penn State University.

Penn State is about a 200 mile drive way up into the central Pennsylvania mountains and the last half of the ride is not an interstate highway. By the time we arrived at the Bryce Jordan Arena, the temperature had dropped at least 20 degrees and we got in line for the security check which was mainly open your coats.

I'd seen Dylan at this venue two years before on tour with Phil Lesh, which featured the parking lot Deadhead convention. It was like walking back into 1968. Every lost VW bus was in the lot. This time there was none of that.

The crowd seemed strange, subdued. People there out of curiosity. The stage was massive with black and white checks like some ballroom from the forties. Dylan took the stage, picked up his new black and white Martin and launched into "I'm A Roving Gambler." Right there, a bit of air went out of the balloon. Fine song, performed okay, but I'd seen it several times before. All I could think of was the '97 tour where he was pulling out all kinds of songs rarely or never played like "Blind Willie McTell" "One Of Us Must Know," and "Seven Days," comes to Philly and plays a set he could've played any time in the previous 20 years. "Girl From the North Country" came next and he blew the first line, and ended with one of his search and destroy guitar solos that make you wish he would let his guitarists play. And then the sound started bouncing back around the cavernous arena which was not close to being sold out. It was like listening to a talk radio show where the caller doesn't turn down their phone. You'd hear a line and as the next one was being sung the line just sung would come back at you. Only the songs from *"Love And Theft"* truly stood out, though "Floater," one of the strangest songs Dylan's written never found the groove. It was a long ride home down the blue mountain roads past the runaway truck ramps.

Four days later I found myself in Washington DC at some place called the MCI Center. At the entrance to the venue's basement parking lot, the cops almost jokingly said, "Hey, guess what, you're up for a random spot check, pop the trunk." They looked in the trunk, laughed about my friend's baby seat, looked under the car with mirrors on sticks, and let us through. Inside the venue despite signs to the contrary, there was no search at all, and the vibe was totally different than Penn State.

This time Dylan opened with "Wait For The Light To Shine" and he was on fire from the first note. Again he followed with "Girl From the North Country," but this time there were no muffed lines and then a deliberate "Hard Rain" that surged and sailed, the intensity growing with each verse. He brought the energy down a bit for the old country cover, "Searching For A Soldier's Grave," which only heightened the impact of the roar of "Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum." Everything that was wrong at Penn State was right tonight. Dylan played guitar leads where you didn't want him to stop, and then would pull back and let the band take over.

After a dip back into the past, Larry Campbell strapped on his banjo for a brilliant "High Water" with Sexton playing an ominous twangy lead while Dylan barked out the words, each final line a warning, "It's rough out there, it's bad out there." This was followed by a carefully played "Floater" which seemed like it had gone through a couple of sound check rehearsals since Penn State, though Campbell's guitar didn't really take the place of his fiddle on the album version.

Then came one of the surprising and chilling highlights of this tour, "John Brown." Dylan first recorded this song under the pseudonym Blind Boy Grunt for an album put out by *Broadside Magazine* which published the works of the New York-based and other topical songwriters of the '60s. The song was forgotten for years and resurrected (probably at the suggestion of Jerry Garcia) for Dylans '87 tour with the Grateful Dead, and has remained in his shows on and off ever since, finally recording it for Columbia on the *Unplugged* album. Based on the traditional tune "900 Miles," the current arrangement is stripped down, as close as you're going to come to seeing Dylan play solo. With only the briefest of instrumental interludes, Dylan let the words tell the story of a mother who proudly sends her son off to war to not recognize the cripple who returns. But the line that seemed to resonate on this night was when the son tells his mother about the battle and how "the enemy's face looked just like mine."

Dylan quickly switched into high gear for "Summer Days," the Joe Turner inspired jump/swing/rockabilly tune that climaxed with a three guitar assault, for a soaring version of "Mississippi" that found his voice sailing way over the band (almost the way he did in '66). It was the high point of a high night.

The encores with the exception of the new "Honest With Me" were almost anticlimactic. They were all well sung and performed, but the real meat of the show was over.

Two days later it was Philly. Again in a cavernous arena, the Spectrum where Dylan has played several times. Again he was on from the first note

of "Wait For the Light to Shine," followed by an excellent "It Ain't Me Babe." In Philly Dylan seemed even more focused on the music, on getting it right. His guitar solos went past the three-note noodling and went somewhere. On "Hard Rain," his left leg never stopped moving, shaking grinding. Where "Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum," rocked in DC, tonight it was spooky, right from the swamp. On "Lonesome Day Blues," he delivered a guitar solo that could've come from any classic Chicago blues album, and on "Honest With Me," wailed the line, "My parents told me not to waste my years/And I still got their advice oooooozing out of my ears."

"Sugar Baby" silenced the arena. And at the end of the first set and again at the end of the night, a curious thing happened - something I hadn't seen at a concert in years. All of a sudden, spontaneously, there were thousands of raised cigarette lighters. One couldn't have asked for a better show.

Two days later, it was the big one, the show everyone had anticipated, New York. Madison Square Garden. There's always a sense of excitement on the streets on New York - even now --and the vibe outside the Garden was charged. This time there was a major security check with arms spread while a guard ran a wand all over your body and told you what was in your pockets. The new America, or the new New York. Inside they waited over 30 minutes past showtime for the place to fill up. Patti Smith went on stage with her kids and sat behind the monitor mixing board. Other celebrities were in the crowd.

Dylan and band took the stage and to say he was "on" does not do it justice. He was charged like a rocket, again opening with "Wait For The Light to Shine," this time emphasizing the "keep looking for a sign" line in the chorus. The set list was almost identical to Philly except the energy was so high that both DC and Philly seemed like warm ups for the main event. He never stopped moving. On "It Ain't Me Babe," (and unlike Philly and DC where there was a curtain on stage) this time there were people behind the stage, and when Dylan turned around to get the harp he seemed to realize they were there for the first time and they erupted. He picked up the harp and without wasting a second blew the first few notes right at them and that whole section of the Garden went crazy. He then turned back to the rest of the crowd and simply went crazy on the harp, knees bent, up and down, the notes ringing clear. It was magnificent.

And so into the night, doing almost the same exact songs as Philly, but this was New York, the place where he made it, whose streets and lofts and rooftops and nights echo in dozens of his songs. Every song took the show to a different place, every song was right on the mark and he was giving it his all. "Tweedle Dee" simply smoked and then on "Just Like A Woman," where that night inside the rain couldn't be anywhere else but Manhattan, he gets into this thing where he's answering each line he sings with his

guitar, and then picks up the harp again going into his crazy Dylan dance and the entire Garden is ecstatic, and then a special New York moment, "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues." And there's no doubt why he's singing it, to get to that last line, "I'm going back to New York City/I do believe I've had enough." And everyone who knows the song knows it, and he knows it and when he hits that line the place erupts.

Then it was into "Lonesome Day Blues," perfect song for the place that experienced one of the saddest and loneliest days known to man. The band is wailing on the sarcastic guitar riff and Dylan is now menacing on the line, "My captain he's decorated, he's well schooled and he's ski-illed."

"High Water" took things even higher, the perfect American roots song, but the words are hitting home in a big way: "Things are breaking up out there."

And then it's way back to when he first walked these streets with "Don't Think Twice," and again he goes for the harp which he didn't do in Philly or DC, and I felt this is his little gift to New York, and I thought back to a crazy harp solo delivered long ago on a Halloween night when I was 13 and there's something special going on.

This was followed by a super-charged "Tangled Up In Blue." Dylan has this way of getting into the rhythm of the words and then hanging on. Tonight it was an almost staccato delivery that drove the place wild, only to quiet down totally for "John Brown." Then wham it was into "Summer Days" and he couldn't be more on, and then he brings the energy down again for "Sugar Baby," and the crowd is hushed, only to be woken up by the Hendrix guitar riffs of "Drifter's Escape," and suddenly in the middle there's this guitar solo from out of nowhere and it's not Charlie Sexton or Larry Campbell, it's Dylan, showing everyone that he can really play that Strat when he wants to and again he goes for the harp and it's perfect.

Then it's into the standard closer for the tour, "Rainy Day Women," usually a song I could care less about hearing ever again. But for whatever crazy reason Dylan's actually been *singing* it on this tour, and then, just as he's done on every show in the middle of the song he starts to introduce his band, and as usual he says, "Ladies and Gentleman, I wanna introduce my band, the best band in the land," and then he paused for just a second and he said, "Most of the songs we're playin' tonight were written here and those that weren't were recorded here. So no one has to ask me how I feel about this town." And then he went on to introduce David Kemper as the only drummer who's better than no drummer at all. But those two sentences about New York were as moving as anything I've seen on any concert stage.

On the way off-stage Dylan stopped to reach up to the audience who'd watched from the rear and then amazingly enough he took some CDs that were handed to him and autographed them.

The encores tonight meant something again, "Forever Young" an almost tearful blessing, the "how many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died," in "Blowin' In The Wind," and especially "All Along the Watchtower," which now starts with a few bars of the "Theme From Exodus," and now ends with the last verse repeated and comes crashing down on the line, "None of them along the line know what any of it is worth."

Madison Square Garden 2001 and one will go down as one of the great Dylan concerts of all time.

Much later that night we walked back past the Garden to the car. The tour busses were on 35<sup>th</sup> Street. The carnival was moving on. We walked up to take a look. At least three very long semi trucks were waiting to be loaded up, like the busses, engines running, and one was in the loading dock. A parade of front end loaders carrying the equipment from the stage.

A security guard stood in front of one of the busses. He was a kid and started talking. "It's a shame," he said, "these people buy counterfeit tickets from scalpers and we have to kick them out. I don't like doing it, but we have no choice." We turned and walked West towards the Hudson.